LA BELLE NIVERNAISE

BY

DAUDET

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From Julia
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For your birthday

LA BELLE NIVERNAISE

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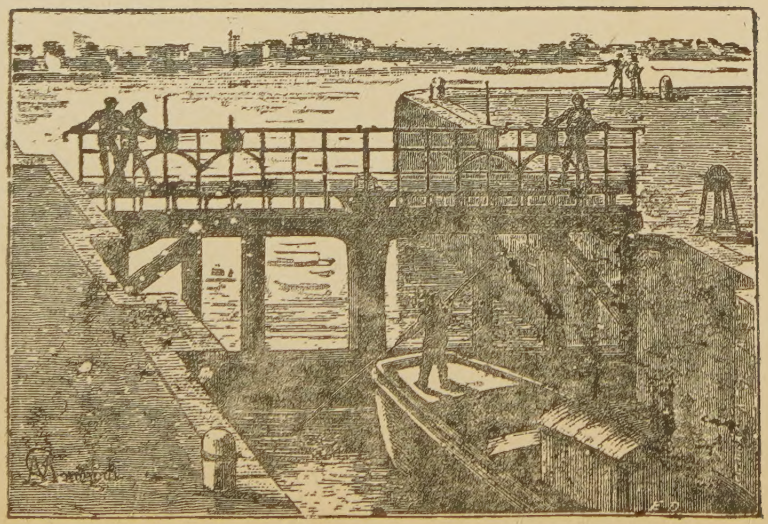

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La Belle Nivernaise

By Alphonse Daudet

Boston & L. C. Page & Company & MDCCCCV

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LA BELLE NIVERNAISE.

CHAPTER I.

A RASH ACT.

THE street Des Enfants-Rouges is in the Temple quarter — a very narrow street, with stagnant gutters and puddles of black mud, with foul water and mouldy smells pouring from its gaping passages. The houses on each side are very lofty, and have barrack-like windows, that show no curtains behind their dirty panes. These are common lodging-houses, and dwellings of artisans, of day laborers, and of men who work at their trade in their own rooms. There are shops on the ground floor; many pork dealers, wine retailers, vendors of chestnuts, bakers of coarse bread, butchers displaying viands of repulsive tints. In this street you see no carriages, no flounced gowns, no elegant loungers on the pavement: but there are costermongers crying the refuse of the market-places, and a throng of workmen crowding out of the factories with their blouses rolled up under their arms.

This is the eighth of the month, the day when poor people pay their rents, the day when landlords who are tired of waiting any longer turn Want out of doors. On this day you see removal carts going past with piles of iron bedsteads, torn mattresses, kitchen utensils, and lame tables rearing up their legs in the air; and with not even a handful of straw to pack the wretched things, damaged and worn out as they are by being knocked about on dirty staircases, and tumbled down from attic to basement.

It is now getting dark, and one after another the gas-lamps are lighted, and send their reflections from the gutters and the shop windows. The passers-by, however, hasten onwards; for the fog is chilly.

But there, in a warm comfortable wine-shop, is the honest old bargeman, Louveau, leaning against the counter, and taking a friendly glass with the joiner from La Villette. The bargeman's big, weather-beaten face dilates into a hearty laugh, that makes the copper rings in his ears shake again, as he exclaims:

"So it's settled, friend Dubac, that you take my load of timber at the price I have named."

"Agreed."

"Your good health."

"Here's to yours."

They clink their glasses together, and Louveau drinks with his head thrown back and his eyes half closed, smacking his lips in order to taste better the flavor of his white wine.

It can't be helped, look you, but every one has his failing; and white wine is the special weakness of our friend Louveau. Not that he is a drunkard. Far from it. Indeed, his wife, who is a woman of sense, would not allow fuddling; but when one has to live like our bargeman, with his feet in the water, and his pate in the sun, it is quite necessary to quaff off a glass now and then.

Louveau is getting more and more elated; and he smiles at the shining zinc counter — which he now sees rather indistinctly — for it brings to his mind the heap of new, bright coins he will pocket to-morrow when he delivers his timber.

After a parting glass, and a shake of the hands, our friends separate.

"To-morrow without fail?"

"You may depend on me."

Louveau, at least, will not fail to keep the

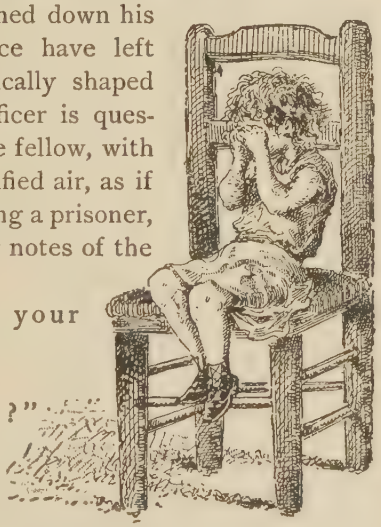
appointment. The bargain is too good, and has been too hard driven for him to be behind.

So in high glee, our bargeman turns down towards the Seine, rolling his shoulders and elbowing his way along, with the exuberant delight of a school-boy who has a franc piece in his pocket.

What will mother Louveau say — the wife with a head-piece — when she learns that her husband has sold his timber right off, and that at a good profit? Two or three more bargains like this, and then they can afford to buy a new boat and drop the *Belle Nivernaise*, for she is beginning to get much too leaky. Not that she is to blame for that, for she was a fine boat when she was new; only, you see, everything gets old and goes to decay; and Louveau himself feels that even he is not now as active as when he used to assist in steering the timber-rafts on the Marne.

But what is going on down there? The gossips are collected before a door, and people are stopping, and engaging in conversation, while the policeman standing in the middle of the gathering is writing something in his note-book. Like everybody else, our bargeman crosses the road to satisfy his curiosity, and see whether a dog has been run over, or a vehicle has stuck

fast, or a tipsy man has fallen into the gutter, or what other equally uninteresting event has occurred. Something different this time! A small child with disordered hair, and cheeks all over jam, is sitting on a wooden chair, rubbing his eyes with his hands, and crying. The tears that have streamed down his rather dirty face have left upon it fantastically shaped marks. The officer is questioning the little fellow, with a calm and dignified air, as if he were examining a prisoner, and he is taking notes of the answers.



"What is your name?"

"Totor."

"Victor What?"

No answer; only the poor little brat cried more, and sobbed "Mamma! Mamma!"

At this moment, a very plain and untidy woman of the laboring class, was passing by, dragging her two children after her. She advanced through the group, and asked the police-officer to allow her to try what she could do.

She knelt down, wiped the little fellow's nose, dried his eyes, and kissed his sticky cheeks.

"What is your mammy's name, my dear?"

He did not know. Then the policeman addressed himself to one of the neighbors:

"Now you should know something about these people, as you are the door-keeper."

No, he had never heard their name, and then there were so many tenants going backwards and forwards in the house. All that could be ascertained was that they had lived there for a month, that they had never paid a farthing of rent, that the landlord had just turned them out, and that it was a good riddance.

"What did they do?"

"Nothing at all."

The father and mother used to spend the day in drinking, and the evening in fighting. They never agreed together in anything, except in thrashing their other children, two lads that used to beg in the streets, and steal things there exposed for sale. A nice family, as you may believe.

"Do you think they will come to look for their child?"

"I am sure they will not."

The removal had, in fact, afforded them an opportunity of abandoning the child. That was

not the first time such a thing had happened on the term days.

"Did nobody see the parents leaving?" asked the policeman.

Yes! they went away in the morning, the husband pushing the hand-cart, while his wife carried a package in her apron, and the two lads had nothing, but their hands in their pockets.

The passers-by after indignantly exclaiming that these people should be caught, continued on their way.

The poor little brat had been there since noon, when his mother had set him in the chair and told him to "be good," and all that time he had been waiting. But when he began to cry for hunger, the fruit-woman over the way had given him a slice of bread with jam on it. This had long ago been devoured, and the little wretch was beginning to cry again.

The poor innocent too was nearly dying with fear. He was afraid of the dogs prowling round him — afraid of the night that was coming on — afraid of the strangers talking to him — and his little heart was beating violently in his bosom, like that of an expiring bird.

As the crowd round him continued to increase, the police officer, tired of the scene, took the child by the hand to lead him to the station.

"Come now; does anybody claim him?"

"Stop a minute!"

Every one turned round, and saw a great ruddy face wearing a silly smile that extended from one copper-ringed ear to the other.

"Stop a minute! if nobody wants him, I will take him myself."

Loud exclamations burst from the crowd: "Well done," — "That's right," — "You are a good fellow."

Old Louveau, excited by the white wine, the success of his bargain, and the general approbation, stood with folded arms in the middle of the admiring circle.

"Oh, it's a simple matter."

Those who were curious went on with him to the police-magistrate's, without letting his enthusiasm cool. When he got there he was asked the questions usual in such cases:

"Your name?"

"Francis Louveau, your Honor, a married man, and if I may say so, well married, to a wife with a head-piece. And that is lucky for me, your Honor, for you see I am not very clever myself, ha! ha! not very clever. I'm not an eagle. 'Francis is not an eagle,' my wife says."

He had never before been so eloquent, but

now he felt his tongue loosened, and all the assurance of a man who had just concluded a good bargain — and who had drunk a bottle of white wine.

"Your occupation?"

"Bargeman, your Honor, master of the *Belle Nivernaise*, rather a rough boat, but manned by a smartish crew. Ah! now mine is a famous crew. . . Ask the lock-keepers all the way from the Pont Marie to Clamecy. . . has your Honor ever been there, at Clamecy?"

The people about him were smiling, but Louveau went on, spluttering and clipping short his syllables.

"Well now, Clamecy is a nice place, if you like! It's wooded from top to bottom; and with good wood, workable wood; all the joiners know that. . . It is there I buy my timber. He! he! I am famous for my timber. I see a thing at a glance, look you! Not because I am clever; as my wife says, I am by no means an eagle: but in fact I do see a thing at a glance. . . For instance, now, I take a tree as thick as you — asking your Honor's pardon — and I lap a string round it, this way. . ."

He had drawn a cord from his pocket, and seizing hold of the officer standing by, had encircled him with it.

The officer struggled to disentangle himself:

"Please leave me alone."

"Yes. . . yes. . . I want to show his Honor how I pass the string round it, and then when I have the girth, I multiply it by. . . I multiply by. . . I forget now what I multiply by. . . My wife does the calculation. She has a good head-piece, has my wife."

The audience was highly amused, and the magistrate himself could not refrain from smiling behind his table. When the laughter had subsided a little, he asked:

"What will you make of this child?"

"Certainly not a gentleman. We have never had a gentleman in our family. But he shall be a bargeman, a smart barge lad, like the rest."

Have you any children?"

"I should think I have! I have one able to walk, another at the breast, and there is a third one coming. That's not so bad, is it? for a man who is not an eagle. With this one there will be four; but pooh! where there is enough for three, there is enough for four. Packed a little closer, that's all. One must pull one's belt a little tighter and try to get more for one's wood."

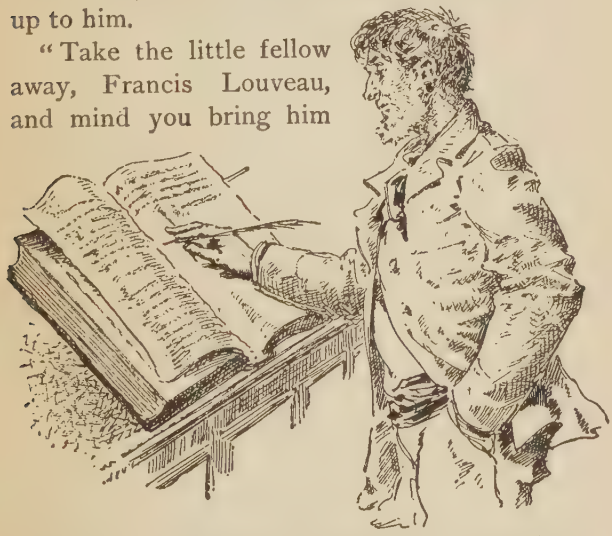
And his laughter again shook the ear-rings,

as he turned a complacent look on those present.

A big book was put before him, but as he could not write he had to sign with a cross.

The magistrate thereupon gave the lost child up to him.

"Take the little fellow away, Francis Louveau, and mind you bring him



up well. If any inquiries are made about him, I will let you know. But it is not likely that his parents will ever claim him. As for you, you seem to me an honest man, and I have confidence in you. Always be guided by your wife; and now good by, and don't you take too much white wine."

A dark night, a cold fog, a lot of unconcerned people hurrying away home — that all tends to quickly bring a man to his senses.

Hardly had our bargeman got into the street by himself, leading by the hand the child he had taken under his care, and carrying his stamped document in his pocket, than he felt his enthusiasm suddenly cool down and he became aware of the serious import of his act.

Is he then always to be like this? Always to be a simpleton and a braggart? Why could not he go on his way like other people without meddling in what did not concern him?

Now for the first time, he pictured to himself the wrath of mother Louveau. Just fancy the kind of reception he will meet with!

What a dreadful thing it is for a simple, kind-hearted man to have a shrewd wife! He would never have the courage to go home and yet he dared not go back to the police-magistrate's. Whatever should he do?

They went on through the fog, Louveau gesticulating and talking to himself. He was getting a speech ready.

Victor was dragging his shoes in the mud and letting himself be pulled along like a dead weight. At length, he could go no farther, and then Louveau stopped, lifted him up and carried

him, wrapping his overall round him. The twining of the little arms round his neck caused our bargeman to resume his journey with a rather better heart.

Faith, bad as it was, he would run the risk. If mother Louveau turned them out, there would still be time to carry the little brat back to the police office; but if she would keep him only for one night, he would be the gainer by a good meal.

They came to the Bridge of Austerlitz where the *Belle Nivernaise* was moored, and the faint pleasant odor from the loads of newly cut wood filled the night air. A whole fleet of boats was rocking in the dark shade of the river's bank, and the movement of the water made the lamps swing and the chains grate together.

To get to his boat, Louveau had to pass over

two lighters connected by planks. He went on with timid steps and trembling limbs, hampered by the hug of the child's arms about his neck.

The night was extremely dark, and the only signs of life about the *Belle Nivernaise* were the little lamp shining in the cabin window, and the ray of light that found its way beneath the door.

Mother Louveau's voice was heard chiding the children, while she was cooking the evening meal :

"Be quiet, Clara !"

It was now too late for retreat, and the bargeman pushed the door open. Mother Louveau had her back towards it, and was leaning over her frying-pan, but she knew his footstep, and without turning round, said :

"Is it you, Francis ? How late you are in getting back !"

The frying potatoes were dancing about in the crackling oil ; and as the steam from the pan passed towards the open door, it dimmed the panes of the cabin windows.

Francis had put the poor brat on the floor, and the little fellow, impressed by the warmth of the place, and feeling his reddened fingers restored to animation, smiled and said in a rather soft and sweet voice :

"Warm here."

Mother Louveau turned round, and pointing to the ragged child standing in the middle of the room, asked her husband in angry tones :

"What is that?"

But even in the best of households there are such moments.

"A surprise for you, he! he! a surprise."

The bargeman grinned from ear to ear, in order to keep himself in countenance; but he very much wished that he was still in the street. However, as his wife was waiting for an explanation, and glaring at him with a dreadful look, he faltered out his story in a jumbled way, with the supplicating eyes of a dog threatened with the whip.

His parents had abandoned him, and he had found him crying on the pavement. Some one had asked if anybody would take him. He said he would. And the police-magistrate had told him he might take him away.

"Didn't he, my child?"

Then the storm burst upon him :

"You are mad, or drunk! Did ever any one hear tell of such a piece of folly! I suppose you want us to die of starvation? Do you think we are too well off? That we have too much to eat? Too much room to lie in?"

Francis contemplated his shoes without answering a word.

"Think of yourself, you wretch, and think of us! Your boat is holed like my skimmer, and yet you must go and amuse yourself by picking up other people's children out of the gutter!"

But the poor fellow knew all that too well already, and did not attempt to deny it. He bowed his head like a criminal listening to the statement of his guilt.

"You will do me the favor of taking that child back to the police-magistrate, and if any

objections are made about receiving him back again, you must say that your wife won't have him. Do you understand?"

She advanced towards him pan in hand, with a threatening gesture, and the bargeman promised to do all she wished.

"Come now, don't get vexed. I thought I was doing right. I have made a mistake. That's enough. Must he be taken back at once?"

Her good-man's submission softened mother Louveau's heart. Perhaps also there arose in her mind the vision of a child of her own, lost and alone at night, stretching out its hands towards the passers by.

She turned to put her pan on the fire, and said in a testy tone:

"It cannot be done to-night, for the office is closed. And now that you have brought him, you cannot set him down again on the pavement. He shall remain to-night; but to-morrow morning. . ."

Mother Louveau was so enraged that she poked the fire first with one hand and then with the other.

"But I vow that to-morrow you shall rid me of him!"

There was silence.

The housewife laid the table savagely, knocking the glasses together, and dashing the forks down. Clara was frightened, and kept very quiet in one corner.

The baby was whining on the bed, and the lost child was looking with wonder at the cinders in the stove getting red hot. Perhaps he had never seen a fire in all his life before.

There was, however, another pleasure in store for him, when he was put to the table with a napkin round his neck, and a heap of potatoes on his plate. He ate like a robin-redbreast picking crumbs off the snow.

Mother Louveau helped him furiously, but at heart she was a little bit touched by the appetite of the starved child. Little Clara was delighted, and stroked him with her spoon. Louveau was dismayed and dared not lift an eye.

When she had removed the table things and put her children to bed, mother Louveau seated herself near the fire, and took the child between her knees to give him a little wash.

"We can't put him to bed in that dirty state."

I lay he had never before seen either sponge or comb. Under her hands the poor child twirled round like a top.

But when once he had been washed and tidied up, the little lad did not look bad, with his pink poodle-like nose, and hands as plump as rosy apples.

Mother Louveau looked upon her work with a certain degree of satisfaction.

"I wonder how old he is?"

Francis laid down his pipe, delighted once more to be an actor in the scene. This was the first time he had been spoken to all the evening, and a question addressed to him was almost like a recall to grace. He rose up and drew his cords from his pocket.

"How old? He! he! I'll tell you in a minute."

He took the little fellow in his arms, and wound lines round him as he did to the tree at Clamecy.

Mother Louveau looked on with amazement.

"Whatever are you doing?"

"I am taking his dimensions."

She snatched the cord from his hands, and flung it to the other end of the apartment.

"My good man, how silly you make yourself with these mad tricks! The child is not a young tree."

No chance for you, this evening, poor Francis! Quite abashed he beats a retreat, whilst mother Louveau puts the little one to bed in Clara's cot.

The little girl is sleeping with closed hands and taking up all the room. She is vaguely conscious that something is put beside her, stretches out her arms, pushes her neighbor into a corner, digs her elbows into his eyes, turns over and goes to sleep again.

In the meantime the lamp has been blown out, and the Seine rippling round the boat gently rocks the wooden habitation.

The poor lost child feels a gentle warmth steal over him, and he falls asleep with the new sensation of something like a caressing hand upon his head, just as his eyes are closing.

CHAPTER II.

THE BELLE NIVERNAISE.

MADEMOISELLE CLARA used always to awake early, and this morning she was surprised at not seeing her mother in the cabin, and at finding another head on the pillow beside her. She rubbed her eyes with her little fingers, then took hold of her bedfellow by the hair and shook him.

Poor "Totor" was aroused by the strangest sensations, for roguish fingers were teasing him by tickling his neck and seizing hold of his nose.

He cast his wondering eyes round about him, and was quite surprised that his dream still continued. Above them there was a creaking of foot-

steps, and a rumbling sound caused by the unloading of the planks upon the quay.

Mademoiselle Clara seemed greatly perplexed. She pointed her little finger to the ceiling with a gesture that seemed to ask her friend:

"What is that?"

It was the delivery of the wood beginning. Dubac, the joiner from La Villette, had come at six o'clock with his horse and cart, and Louveau had very quickly set to work, with a hitherto unknown ardor.

The good fellow had not closed an eye all night for thinking that he would have to take that child, who had been so cold and hungry, back to the police-magistrate.

He expected to have a scene in the morning again; but mother Louveau had some other notions in her head, for she did not mention Victor to him: and Francis thought that much might be gained by postponing the time for explanations.

He was striving to efface himself, and to escape from his wife's view, and he was working with all his might, lest mother Louveau should see him idle, and should call out to him:

"Come now, as you have nothing to do, take the little boy back where you found him."

And he did work. The pile of planks was visibly diminishing. Dubac had already made three journeys, and mother Louveau, standing on the gangway with her nursling on her arm, had her time fully taken up in counting the lots as they passed.

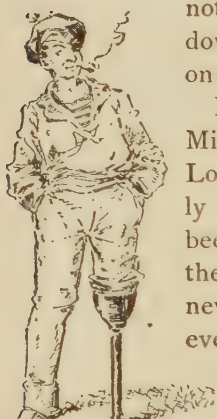
Working with a will, Francis selected for his

burdens rafters as long as masts and as thick as walls. If the beam were too heavy, he called the Crew to help him to load.

The Crew was a boatman with a wooden leg, and he alone formed the personal equipment of the *Belle Nivernaise*. He had been picked up from charity, and retained from habit.

This maimed one would prop himself up on his peg, or raise up the log with great effort, and Louveau, bending beneath the load, with his belt tight round his waist, would pass slowly over the movable bridge.

How could a man so busily occupied be interrupted in his work? Mother Louveau could not think of it. She went up and down on the gangway, intent only on Mimile who was at her breast.



He was always thirsty, that Mimile. Like his father. But Louveau, thirsty? . . . he certainly was not so to-day. He had been working since morning, and the question of white wine had never been raised. He had not even taken breathing time, or wiped his brow, or drunk a drop at the edge of a counter. Even when, after a little, Dubac proposed to go and have a glass, Francis heroically replied:

"We shall have time later on."

Refuse a glass! the housewife could not understand it at all; this could not be her Louveau, but must be some substitute.

Her Clara now seems a changeling also, for

eleven o'clock has struck, and the little girl, who would never remain in bed, has not stirred the whole morning.

Mother Louveau hastens into the cabin to see what is going on. Francis remains on deck, swinging his arms, and gasping for breath, as if he had just received in his stomach a blow from a joist.

Now for it! His wife has bethought herself of Victor; she is going to bring him on deck, and he must start for the police office. . . . But no; mother Louveau reappears all alone. She is laughing and she beckons to him:

"Just come and look here, it is so funny!"

The good man cannot understand this sudden hilarity, and he follows her like an automaton, the fulness of his emotion almost depriving him of the use of his legs.

The two monkeys were sitting on the edge of the bed, in their shirts, and with bare feet. They had possessed themselves of the bowl of soup that the mother left within reach of their little arms when she got up. As there was only one spoon for the two mouths, they were cramming each other in turns, like fledglings in a nest; and Clara, who used always to be averse to taking her soup, was laughing and stretching out her mouth for the spoon. Although some

crumbs of bread might have got into eyes or ears, the two babies had broken nothing, had upset nothing, and they were amusing themselves so heartily that it was impossible to find fault with them.

Mother Louveau continued to laugh.

"As they are agreeing so well as that, we need not trouble ourselves about them."

Francis immediately returned to his work, quite delighted with the turn things were taking.

Usually, at the unloading time, he would take a rest during the day; that is to say, he would go the round of all the bargemen's taverns, from the Point-du-Jour to the Quai de Bercy. So that the unloading used to drag on for a whole week, during which mother Louveau's wrath would continue unappeased.

But this time there was no idleness, no white wine, but a passionate desire to do well by ardent and sustained labor.

On his part the little fellow, as if he understood that his cause must be won, was doing all that he possiby could to amuse Clara.

For the first time in her life, this little girl passed a whole day without tears, without dashing herself about, without making holes in her stockings. Her companion amused her, soothed her. He was always willing to make a sacrifice of his hair to stop Clara's tears on the edges of her eyelid.

And she tugged at her big friend's rough poll by handfuls, teasing him like a pug-dog nipping a poodle.

Mother Louveau observed all this from a distance, and inwardly remarked that this child was just as useful as a little nurse. So they might keep Victor until the unloading was finished. There would be time to take him back afterwards, just before their departure.

For this reason, she did not that evening make any allusion to sending him back, but gorged him with potatoes, and put him to bed as on the night before.

One would have thought that Louveau's little friend was a member of the family, and to see the way Clara put her arm round his neck as she went to sleep, would lead one to suppose that she had taken him under her special protection.

The unloading of the *Belle Nivernaise* lasted three days. Three days of impetuous labor,

without any relaxation, without any break. About midday the last cart was laden and the boat was empty.

They could not take the tug until the morrow, and Francis passed the whole day between decks, repairing the planks, but still haunted by those words that for three days had been ringing in his ears :

" Take him back to the police-magistrate."

Ah ! that magistrate ! He was not more dreaded in the house of wicked Mr. Punch than he was in the cabin of the *Belle Nivernaise*. He had become a kind of bogle that mother Louveau availed herself of to keep Clara quiet.

Every time she pronounced that name of fear, the little fellow fixed upon her the restless eyes of a child who has too early had experience of suffering.

He vaguely understood all that this word meant of dangers to come. The magistrate ! That meant no more Clara, no more caresses, no more warmth, no more potatoes ; but a return to a cheerless life, to days without bread, to slumbers without bed, to awakening in the morning without kisses.

How he therefore clung to mother Louveau's skirts on the eve of the boat's departure ! — when Francis, in a trembling voice, asked :

"Come now, shall we take him back yes or no?"

Mother Louveau did not answer. You would even fancy she was thinking of some pretext for keeping Victor.

As for Clara, she rolled on the floor, choking with sobs, and determined to have convulsions if she were separated from her friend.

Then the wife with a head-piece spoke seriously:

"My good man, you have done a foolish act, as usual. And now you have to pay for it. This child has become attached to us, Clara is fond of him, and every one would be grieved to see him leave. I am going to try and keep him, but I will have each one to bear a part. The first time that Clara works herself up into a fit of passion, or that you get drunk, I shall take him back to the police-magistrate's."

Old Louveau became radiant.

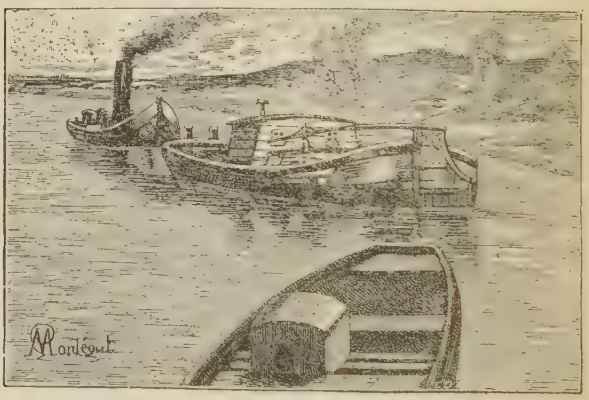
It was done. He would drink no more.

He smiled right up to his ear-rings and sang away as he coiled his cable on the deck, whilst the tug towed along the *Belle Nivernaise* together with quite a fleet of other boats.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER WAY.

Victor was under way. Under way for the suburban country, where the water mirrors little houses and green gardens — under way for the white land of the chalk hills — under way beside the flagged, resounding towing-paths



— under way for the uplands, for the canal of the Yonne, slumbering within its locks — under way for the verdure of winter, and for the woods of Morvan.

Francis leant against the tiller of his boat,

firm in his resolution not to drink, and turned a deaf ear to the invitations of the lock-keepers, and of the wine-dealers, who were astonished to see him passing free. He was obliged to cling to the tiller to keep the *Belle Nivernaise* from going alongside of the taverns. The old boat, from the time she had made the same voyage, seemed as if she knew the stations, and wanted to stop at them of her own accord, like an omnibus horse.

The Crew was perched on one leg in the prow, where, handling an immense boat-hook in a melancholy way, he pushed back the bushes, rounded the turns, and grappled the locks.

It was not much work he used to do, although the noise of his wooden leg on the deck might be heard day and night.

Resigned and silent, he was one of those for whom everything in life had gone wrong. A school-fellow had caused him the loss of an eye; an axe had lamed him at the saw-mill; a vat had scalded him at the sugar refinery.

He would have been a beggar dying of hunger at the edge of a ditch, if Louveau — who always saw a thing at a glance — had not, as he was coming out of the hospital, engaged him to help in working the boat.

This was, at the time, the occasion of a great quarrel — exactly as for Victor. The wife with a head-piece was vexed, whereupon Louveau gave in.

In the end, the Crew remained, and at this time he formed part of the household of the *Belle Nivernaise*, on the same footing as the cat and the raven.

Old Louveau steered so exactly, and the Crew worked the boat so well, that after having ascended the river and the canals, the *Belle Nivernaise*, twelve days after her departure from Paris, got moored at the bridge of Corbigny, there to rest peacefully in her winter sleep.

From December to the end of February, the bargemen make no voyages, but repair their boats, and look through the forests to buy the spring cuttings as they stand.

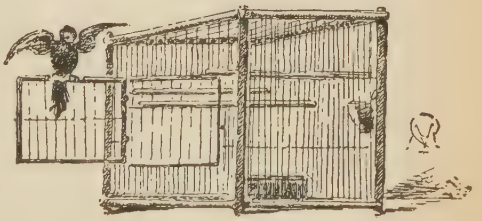
As wood is cheap, they keep good fires in the cabins; and if the autumn sale has been successful, this idle time is made into a very enjoyable holiday.

The *Belle Nivernaise* was laid up for wintering; that is to say, the rudder was detached, the jury-mast was stowed away between decks, and the whole space was clear for playing and running about on the upper deck.

What a change in his life for the foundling!

During all the voyage, he had continued in a state of astonishment and fear. He was like a cage-bird surprised by being set free, that in the suddenness of the change, forgets its song and its wings. Though too young to enjoy the charms of the landscape spread before his eyes, he had nevertheless been impressed by the grandeur of that passage up the river between two ever-changing horizons.

Mother Louveau, seeing him shy and silent, kept on all day saying:



"He is deaf and dumb."

But the little Parisian from the Temple district was not dumb! When he got to understand that he was not dreaming, that he should no more go back to his garret, and that, in spite of mother Louveau's threats, there was really not much to fear from the police-magistrate, his tongue was loosed. It was like the blossoming of a plant grown in a cellar and then put upon a window shelf. He ceased to cower timidly down in corners like a hunted ferret. His eyes, deeply set under his projecting brow, lost their

uneasy restlessness, and although he remained rather pale and had a thoughtful look, he learned to laugh with Clara.

The little girl passionately loved her playfellow, as people do love each other at that age — for the pleasure of falling out and making it up again. Although she was as self-willed as a little donkey, she had a very tender heart, and the mention of the magistrate was enough to make her do as she was bid.

They had hardly arrived at Corbigny, when another sister came into the world. Mimile was just eighteen months old, and that made cots enough in the cabin — and work enough likewise; for, with all the encumbrances they had, they cold not afford a servant.

Mother Louveau grumbled so much that the Crew's wooden leg quaked with fear. But nobody in the place had any pity for her. Even the peasants did not hesitate to say what they thought about it to the priest, who used to hold up the bargeman as a pattern.

"Say what your Reverence likes, there's no common sense in a man who has three children of his own picking up those of other people. But the Louveaus have always been like that. They are full of vanity and conceit, and no advice you can give them will alter them."

People did not wish them ill, but were not sorry they had got a lesson.

The vicar was a kind, well-meaning man, who easily adopted the opinions of others, and always wound up by recollecting some passage of Scripture, or sentence from the Fathers, with which to keep his own mind easy about his sudden turns and changes.

"My parishioners are right," said he to himself as he passed his hand under his badly shaven chin, "we must not tempt divine Providence."

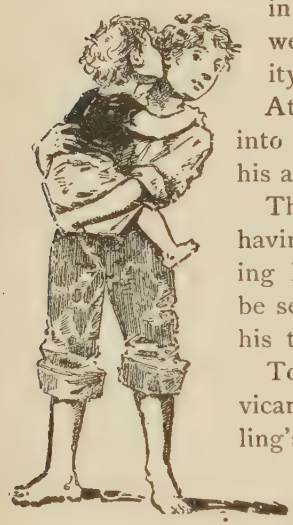
But as the Louveaus were, on the whole, good honest people, he made his pastoral call on them as usual.

He found mother Louveau cutting breeches for Victor out of an old jacket, for the little brat had brought no clothes with him, and she could not bear rags and tatters about her.

She placed a seat for his Reverence, and when he spoke to her about Victor, hinting that with the influence of the Bishop they might perhaps get him into the orphanage at Autun, mother Louveau, who would speak her mind to everybody, abruptly answered:

"The little fellow may be a burden to poor folks like us, certainly; I think that when he brought him home, Francis gave one more proof

that he is not an eagle. I am not harder hearted than my husband; if I had met Victor, I should have been sorry for him, but yet I would have left him where he was. But now that we have taken him, it is not in order to get rid of him; and if we should some day find ourselves in a difficulty through him, we shall not go and ask charity from anybody.



At this moment Victor came into the cabin with Mimile in his arms.

The little monkey, angry at having been weaned, was seeking his revenge by refusing to be set down, and was showing his teeth and biting everybody.

Touched by this sight, the vicar put his hand on the foundling's head and gravely remarked:

"God's blessing is on large families."

And away he went, delighted with himself for having recollected a sentence so appropriate to the situation.

Mother Louveau but told the truth when she said that Victor was now one of the family.

While continually grumbling, and talking about taking the little fellow back to the police-magistrate's, this woman with a head-piece was getting to like the pale-faced child that clung so persistently to her skirts.

When old Louveau thought they were making too much of him, she always replied:

"Then you should not have taken him."

As soon as he was eight years of age, she sent him to school with Clara.

Victor would always carry the books and the basket. He would fight bravely in defending their luncheon against the unscrupulous appetites of the young Morvandians.

Nor did he show less spirit in his work than in his fighting, and although he attended the school in winter only, when no voyages were made, he knew more on his return than the little peasants, who, dull and noisy as their wooden shoes, would yawn over their alphabet for twelve months together.

Victor and Clara used to come back from the school through the forest, and it amused the two children to see the wood-cutters hewing down the trees.

As Victor was light and nimble, they would get him to climb to the top of the pines in order to fasten the rope that served to pull

them down. He would appear smaller and smaller as he clambered higher up, and when he got to the top, Clara would be very frightened. But he was fearless, and would sometimes swing on a branch purposely to plague her.

At other times, they would go to see M. Maugendre in his wood-yard. The wood-dealer was a thin man and as dry as a stick. He lived alone, away from the village, amid the forest.

Nobody ever knew him to have any friends; and the curiosity of the village had for a long time been balked by the seclusion and reserve of the unknown, who had come from the farthest part of the Nièvre to set up a wood-yard away from others.

For six years he worked in all weathers, never taking a holiday, and like a very drudge. Yet it was supposed he had plenty of money, for he did a large trade, and often went to Corbigny to

consult the notary about the investment of his savings.

He once told the vicar that he was a widower, but beyond this nothing was known of him.

When Maugendre observed the children coming, he used to lay down his saw, and leave his work to have a chat with them. He took a great liking for Victor, and taught him to cut hulls of boats out of splinters of wood.

He once said to him :

"You remind me so much of a child I lost."

Then, as if afraid he had told too much, he added :

"Oh! it is a long time ago — a very long time ago."

Another day he said to Louveau :

"When you get tired of Victor give him to me. I have no heirs, and I will deny myself something to send him to college in the town. He shall pass examinations, and be entered at the School of Forestry."

But Francis was still in the flush of his good action, and he declined. Maugendre resolved to wait patiently until the progressive increase of the Louveau family, or some money difficulty,

should have put the bargeman out of conceit with adoptions.

It seemed as if Fate wished to grant his desires. For one might almost believe that ill-luck had embarked on board the *Belle Nivernaise* at the same hour as Victor.

From that moment everything went wrong. The wood did not sell well. The Crew always broke some limb on the eve of the unloading. And at length, one fine day, just as they were setting out for Paris, mother Louveau fell ill.

Francis nearly lost his senses amidst the yelling of the little brats. He mistook soups for draughts, and draughts for soups, and so annoyed the sick woman by his stupidity, that he had to give up attending to her, and let Victor do it.

For the first time in his life, the bargeman bought his wood by himself. It was in vain he lapped his strings round the trees, and took thirty-six times in succession the same measure, for he always went wrong in his calculations. You know the famous calculation :

"I multiply by — I multiply by . . ."

It was mother Louveau that knew how to do that!

He executed his orders all wrong, set out for Paris in a very uneasy state of mind, and fell in

with a dishonest purchaser, who took advantage of the circumstance to cheat him.

He came back to his boat with a very full heart, sat down at the foot of the bed, and said in a despairing tone :

" My dear, you must try to get well, or we shall be ruined."

Mother Louveau recovered slowly. She strove against ill-fortune, and did unheard-of things to make both ends meet.

If they had something to buy a new boat with, they would have been able to get their trade back again ; but during her illness they had expended all their savings, and the profits were now going to fill up the holes in the *Belle Nivernaise*, which was worn out.

Victor became a heavy burden for them. He was no longer a child of four years of age that could be dressed out of an old jacket, and his food never missed.

He was now twelve years of age, and he ate like a man, although he remained a thin, nervous child, such as they could not think of requiring to handle the boat-hook, — when the Crew had broken any limb.

Everything kept going from bad to worse. On their last voyage they had great difficulty in getting up the Seine as far as Clamecy. The

Belle Nivernaise was letting in water at every part, and patching up would no longer suffice ; it would be necessary to repair the entire hull, or rather to put the vessel aside to be broken up, and replace her by a new one.

One evening in March, on the eve of getting under sail for Paris, as Louveau, full of care, was taking leave of Maugendre after having settled his account for wood, the timber-merchant asked him to come and drink a bottle in his house.

"I want to talk with you, Francis."

They went into the cottage, and Maugendre filled two glasses as they placed themselves opposite each other at the table.

"I have not always led a lonely life such as you see now, Louveau. I can remember the time when I had everything that is necessary for happiness : a little money and a wife who loved me. I have lost all — by my own fault."

The wood-merchant stopped ; the confession that was sticking in his throat was nearly choking him.

"I have never been a wicked man, Francis ; but I had a vice."

"You ?"

"I have it still. I love the 'rhino' above everything. That has been the cause of my misfortunes."

"How is that, my dear Maugendre?"

"I am going to tell you. When we were married and had our baby, the idea came into my head of sending my wife to Paris to seek a nurse's place. That pays well when the husband is an orderly man, and knows how to manage his house by himself. But my wife was unwilling to be separated from her infant. She said to me — 'But, husband, we are earning money enough as it is. The rest would be money accursed, and would not profit us. Leave such resources as these to poor households already burdened with children, and spare me the pain of leaving you.' I would not hear of it, Louveau, and I compelled her to go."

"Well?"

"Well, when my wife had found a situation she gave her child into the charge of an old woman to take it back to our place. She saw them to the railway station, and they have never been heard of since."

"And your wife, my dear Maugendre?"

"When this news was told her, it caused her milk to turn, and she died."

They were both silent, Louveau touched by what he had just heard, Maugendre overcome by his remembrances. The wood-merchant spoke the first:

"For my punishment, I am condemned to the existence I now lead. I have lived for twelve years apart from every one. I can endure it no longer. I have a dread of dying alone. If you have any pity for me, you will give me Victor, that he may take for me the place of the child I have lost."

Louveau was much embarrassed. Victor was costing them much; but if they parted with him at the time he was about to make himself useful, all the sacrifices that they made would be thrown away. Maugendre guessed his thoughts:

"I need not say, Francis, that if you give him to me, I shall recoup you what he has cost. It would, moreover, be a good thing for the lad. I can never see the forestry pupils in the wood, without saying to myself: 'I should have been able to make a gentleman of my boy, like those gentlemen.' Victor is industrious, and he pleases me. You know I shall treat him like my own son. Come, now, is it agreed?"

When the children had been put to bed in the cabin of the *Belle Nivernaise*, this matter was talked over. The wife with the head-piece attempted to reason.

"You see, Francis, we have done for that child all that we could. God knows, one would like to keep him, but now that there is an opportunity of parting from him, without making him wretched, we must try to have courage."

Despite themselves, their eyes turned towards the bed, where Victor and Mimile are sleeping the deep and calm sleep of childhood.

"Poor little fellow!" said Francis in a low voice.

They heard the river rippling along the planks, and the occasional whistle of the railway engine piercing the stillness of the night.

Mother Louveau burst out in sobs:

"God help us, Francis, we will keep him."

CHAPTER IV.

LIFE IS HARD.

Victor was nearly fifteen years of age. He had grown up all at once ; the little pale-faced child had become a stout lad, with big shoulders and a quiet carriage.

Since he first sailed on the *Belle Nivernaise*, he began to find his way like an old bargeman, knowing the clear channels, guessing the depths of the water, passing from the handling of the pole to that of the rudder. Now he had a red waist-band, and wore a striped vest about his hips.

When Louveau gave up the tiller to him, Clara, who was growing a big girl, would come and knit beside him, much taken by his calm face and robust movements.

This time, the passage from Corbigny to Paris had been a hard one. The Seine, swollen by the autumn rains, had carried away the weirs, and was rushing towards the sea like a wild beast let loose.

The anxious bargemen hurried on with their deliveries, for the stream was already rolling by at the level of the quays, and messages sent

from the lock stations, hour after hour, brought bad news. It was reported that the tributary streams were breaking down their banks and overflowing the country, and that the flood was getting higher and higher.

The quays were filled with a busy crowd, a swarm of men, carts and horses; while up aloft

the steam-cranes were working their huge arms. The wine-market was already cleared out, and drays were carrying away cases of sugar. The mooring-men were leaving their cabins; the quays were getting empty; and a file of wagons was ascending the slope of the incline, retreating from the flood like an army on the march.

The Louveaus were so hindered by the rough

ness of the water, and the intermission of work in the moonless nights, that they despaired of delivering their wood in time. Everybody had taken his share of the work, and they labored till very late in the evening, by the light of lanterns and of the gas lamps on the quay.

At eleven o'clock, all the cargo was piled up at the foot of the incline; and, as Dubac the joiner's cart did not reappear, they went to bed.

It was a dreadful night, with much grinding together of chains, creaking of planks, and bumping of boats. The *Belle Nivernaise*, with her timbers loosened by the shocks, groaned like one in pain.

It was impossible to close an eye. Louveau, his wife, Victor, and the Crew rose up at daybreak and left the children in bed.

The Seine had risen still higher during the night, and rough and surging like a sea, its green waters were rushing on under a heavy sky. On the quays there was no movement of life — on the river not a boat; nothing but the remains of roofs and fences borne along in the current of the stream. Beyond the bridges the outline of Notre-Dame was shadowed out against the fog.

There was not a moment to be lost, for the river had already got over the parapets of the

lower quay, and the little waves that lapped the ends of the planks had caused the stacks of wood to tumble down.

While Francis, mother Louveau and Dubac were loading the cart, with the water half-way up to their knees, they were startled by a loud crash on one side of them. A lighter laden with mill-stones had parted its mooring chain, and had come against the quay and foundered, being split up from stem to stern. It sank with a dreadful noise, and a strong eddy took its place.

They were standing motionless, impressed by this sudden wreck, when they heard shouts behind them. The *Belle Nivernaise*, unmoored by the agitation, was leaving the quay. Mother Louveau raised a cry :

"My children !"

Victor had already rushed into the cabin, and

he now reappeared on deck with the little one in his arms. Clara and Mimile followed him, and all stretched out their hands towards the quay.

"Take them!"

"A boat!"

"A rope!"

What was to be done? It was impossible to take all of them to shore by swimming. The Crew was running from one plank to another, bewildered, useless. They must get alongside at any cost.

In presence of this bewildered man, and of these sobbing little children, Victor thus unexpectedly made into a captain, felt within himself the energy that was needed to save them. He gave his orders:

"Come, throw a cable! Quick!"

This was done three times over, but the *Belle Nivernaise* was already too far from the quay, and the cable fell into the water.

Victor then ran to the rudder, and they heard him shout:

"Don't be afraid. I'll see after them."

And, in fact, by a vigorous movement of the tiller, he brought the craft right, for having been taken by the water broadside on, she was drifting in the current.

On the quay, poor Louveau quite lost his senses, and wanted to leap into the water in order to reach his children ; but Dubac threw his arms round him, whilst mother Louveau covered her face with her hands to shut out the dreadful sight.

The *Belle Nivernaise* was now keeping in the current, and shooting towards the bridge of Austerlitz with the velocity of a tug-boat.

Composedly leaning against the tiller Victor steered, encouraged the little ones, and gave his orders to the Crew. He knew he was in the right channel, for he had steered for the red flag that hung in the middle of the centre arch to show the bargemen the way.

But, good heavens ! would there be height

enough to pass through! He saw the bridge approaching very quickly.

"Get your boat-hook ready, Crew! You, Clara, don't leave the children."

He was clinging to the rudder, and already he felt the wind from the arch moving his hair. They are in it! Carried on by her impetus, the *Belle Nivernaise* disappeared under the span with a dreadful sound, yet not so fast but that the crowd collected on the bridge of Austerlitz saw the wooden-legged boatman miss the stroke with his boat-hook and fall flat down, whilst the lad at the helm cried out:

"A grapnel! a grapnel!"

The *Belle Nivernaise* was under the bridge. In the shade of the arch Victor distinctly observed the enormous rings made fast to the layer of piles, and the joints of the vault above his head, and in the distance the line of other bridges, enclosing their pieces of sky.

Then it seemed as if there were an enlargement of the horizon, a dazzling glare as when one comes out of a cellar into the light, a sound of hurrahs above his head, and the vision of the cathedral, like a frigate anchored in the stream.

The boat abruptly stopped. The bridgemen had succeeded in throwing a hook on board,

and Victor ran to the mooring-line and wound the rope firmly round the timber-head.

The *Belle Nivernaise* was seen to put about, turn round on the mooring-line, and, obeying the new impulse that was given to her, slowly come alongside the quay of the Tournelle, with her crew of little children and her captain of fifteen years.

Oh! what joy when they found themselves all assembled in the evening round the steaming

stew in the cabin of the boat — this time well anchored, well moored.

The little hero had the place of honor — the captain's seat. They had not much appetite after the experiences of the morning with its violent emotions, but their hearts were expanded as after a period of anguish, and they breathed freely.

There was a wink across the table, as much as to say:

"Ha! if we had taken him back to the police-magistrate's?"

Louveau laughed from ear to ear, as he cast his moistened eyes over his brood. You would have supposed that some good luck had befallen them, that they had gained a big prize in the lottery, or that the *Belle Nivernaise* had no longer any holes in her sides.

The bargeman kept knocking Victor about with punches in the ribs. It was his way of showing his affection. "What a chap Victor is! What a pull of the tiller! Did you see that, Crew? I could not have done better myself, *he! he!* master as I am."

For a fortnight the good fellow could do nothing else but express his admiration, and go along the quays to describe this pull at the tiller. "You know, the boat was drifting. Then he . . . Ah!"

And he showed by a gesture how it was done.

In the meantime the Seine was getting lower, and the time for setting out was again at hand. One morning, as Victor and Louveau were pumping on the deck, the postman brought a letter.

It had a blue seal on the back. The bargeman opened the letter with a rather trembling

hand, and, as he could not trust to his own ability in reading more than in arithmetic, he said to Victor :

"You spell that out for me."

And Victor read :

"OFFICE OF THE COMMISSARY OF POLICE

"*12th Arrondissement*

"Monsieur Louveau (Francis), master bargeman, is requested to call at the Office of the Commissary of Police with as little delay as possible."

"Is that all ?"

"That is all."

"What can he want with me ?"

Louveau was away all day.

When he came back in the evening all his cheerfulness had disappeared ; he was gloomy, cross, sullen.

Mother Louveau could make nothing of it ; and as the youngsters had gone to play on the deck, she asked him :

"Whatever has happened ?"

"I am weary of it."

"What, of unloading ?"

"No, about Victor."

And then he told her about his visit to the police-magistrate.

"You must understand that the woman who abandoned him was not his mother."

"No, really?"

"She had stolen him."

"How do they know that?"

"She herself confessed it to the police-magistrate before she died."

"Then they told you the name of his parents?"

Louveau gave a start.

"Why do you think they would tell me?"

"Well, because they had sent for you."

Francis got vexed.

"If I knew it, you think, perhaps, I should tell you!"

He was quite red with anger, and he went out, slamming the door after him.

Mother Louveau was overcome with astonishment.

"Whatever is the matter with him?"

Yes, what could have been the matter with you, Francis? From that time his ways, his words, his character were quite changed. He could not eat, he slept badly, he talked all night. He even answered his wife back! He fell out with the Crew. He spoke harshly to everybody, and to Victor most of all. When mother Louveau, quite amazed, asked him what was the matter, he answered savagely —

"Nothing at all. Do I look as if anything

was the matter with me? You are all plotting against me."

The poor woman got nothing for her pains:

"Take my word for it, he is going out of his senses."

She thought he was quite cracked, when one evening he made a dreadful scene for them about Maugendre.

They were at the end of the voyage, and had got nearly to Clamecy. Victor and Clara were talking about the school, and the youth having said that he should be glad to see Maugendre again, Louveau flew into a passion:

"Don't talk to me about your Maugendre. I want to have nothing more to do with him."

Mother Louveau interposed:

"What has he done to you?"

"He has . . . he has . . . It does not matter to you. I am the master, I suppose."

Alas! He was so much the master now, that instead of making fast at Corbigny, as usual, he went two leagues higher up, into the heart of the forest.

He declared that Maugendre thought of nothing else than duping him in all their bargains, and that he could do business on better terms with another vendor.

They were now too far from the village to

think of attending the classes, and therefore Victor and Clara rambled through the woods all day gathering sticks.

When they were tired carrying their burden they would put it down beside a ditch, and sit down on the ground amidst the flowers. Victor would pull a book out of his pocket, and would get Clara to read.

They liked to see the sun peeping through the branches, and throw a flickering light on the page and on their hair, while about there was the hum of millions of little creatures, and surrounding all reigned the silence of the woods.

When they got late, they had to return very quickly, all along the great avenue, barred by shadows of the tree trunks. The mast of the *Belle Nivernaise* would be visible in the open-

ing at the end, as well as the gleam of a fire through the slight fog rising from the river.

It was mother Louveau cooking, in the open air at the margin of the stream, over a fire of waste rubbish.

Mimile would be sitting close by her, with his hair all ruffled, his shirt bursting through his breeches, and he would be lovingly contemplating the pot, while his little sister rolled about on the ground, while Louveau and the Crew smoked their pipes.

One evening, at supper time, they saw some one come out of the wood and advance towards them.

"Ha! Maugendre!"

It was the timber-merchant. He looked much older, and much grayer. He had a stick in his hand, and seemed to talk with difficulty.

He came forward to Louveau and held out his hand.

"Well, you have left me then, Francis?"

The bargeman stammered out a confused reply.

"Oh! I am not vexed at you."

He had so wearied a look that mother Louveau was touched by it, and without giving any heed to her husband's bad humor, she handed him a seat.

"You are not ill, I hope, M. Maugendre?"

"I have got a bad cold."

He spoke slowly, almost in a whisper. Suffering had softened him. He told them that he was about to leave the neighborhood, to go to live in the distant part of the Nièvre.

"It's all done with. I have given up business. I am now rich; I have money, plenty of money. But what is the good of it? I cannot buy back the happiness I have lost."

Francis listened with knit brows.

Maugendre continued:

"The older I get, the more keenly do I suffer from being lonely. Formerly, I used to forget all when I was working; but now, I have no longer any heart for work. I have lost interest in everything. So I am going to banish myself; that may perhaps give me some distraction."

And, in spite of himself, his eyes turned towards the children. At this moment Victor and Clara issued from the avenue with their load of branches, and seeing Maugendre, they threw down their bundles and ran to him.

He received them as cordially as usual, and said to Louveau, who remained sullen:

"You are a happy man to have four children. I have none now."

And he sighed: "I must not complain, it is my own fault."

He rose up, and everybody did the same.

"Good-by, Victor. Be industrious, and love your parents; you ought to."

He had put his hand on the boy's shoulder, and was looking at him fixedly.

"Ah, if I had a child, he should be like him."

Louveau opposite to him, with compressed lips, bore an expression that seemed to say:

"Begone from hence."

Yet at the moment the timber-merchant was leaving, Francis felt an impulse of sympathy towards him, and he called him back, saying —

"Maugendre, won't you take soup with us?"

This was said as if against the grain, and in a gruff tone of voice that did not encourage acceptance. The old man shook his head.

"No, I thank you, I am not hungry. When one is melancholy, look you, other people's happiness does not do one much good."

And he departed, bending over his stick.

Louveau did not speak a word the whole evening. He passed the night in walking up and down the deck, and in the morning he went away without saying a word to any one.

He went to the vicarage, which was close to

the church. It was a large square building, with a court in front and a kitchen garden behind. Fowls were foraging at the threshold, and a cow was lowing in the grass.

Louveau felt his heart lightened by the resolution he had taken. As he opened the gate, he said to himself with a sigh of satisfaction, that when he came out of it again he should be relieved of his care.

He found the vicar seated in his cool dining-room. The good priest had finished his breakfast, and was dozing lightly with his head leaning over his breviary. Aroused by Louveau's entrance, he turned down the page, and having closed the book, he motioned to the bargeman, who was twirling his cap in his fingers, to sit down.

"Well, now, Francis, what can I do for you?"

He wanted advice, and he asked to be allowed to tell his story from the beginning.

"Because, as your Reverence knows, I am not very clever. I am not an eagle, he! he! as my wife tells me."

And having put himself at his ease by this preamble, he told his business, very much out of breath, very red, and all the while gazing intently at the peak of his cap.

"Your Reverence will recollect that Maugendre told you he was a widower? He has been so for the last fifteen years. His wife went to Paris to be a nurse. She showed her child to the doctor, as the custom is, gave it the breast for the last time, and then she intrusted it to a *meneuse*."

The priest interrupted him.

"What is a *meneuse*, Francis?"

"A *meneuse*, your Reverence, is a woman who is employed to take back home the children of wet nurses. She carries them away in a creel or basket like kittens."

"That's a queer trade!"

"There are some honest people that carry it on, your Reverence; but mother Maugendre had fallen in with a woman that nobody knew, a witch who stole children and let them out to other idle vagabonds to drag them about the streets in order to excite commiseration."

"You do not mean to say that, Francis?"

"It is the simple truth, your Reverence.

This wretch of a woman carried off a lot of children, and Maugendre's little one among the rest. She kept him for four years. She wanted to teach him to beg; but as he was the son of an honest man, he refused to hold out his hand. Thereupon she abandoned him in the street, and then — become what you can! But now, six months ago, on her deathbed in the hospital, she was stricken with remorse. I know what that is, your Reverence, it is devilish hard to bear. . ."

And he turned his eyes up to the ceiling, poor man, as if to call Heaven to witness the truth of his statement.

"Then she asked for the police-magistrate and she told him the name of the child. The magistrate has informed me. It is Victor."

The vicar let his breviary fall:

"Is Victor Maugendre's son?"

"He is."

The ecclesiastic was taken all aback. He muttered a phrase in which the words "poor child," "finger of God" were distinguishable. He got up, walked about the room, went near the window, drank a glass of water, and ended by stopping in front of Louveau with his hands in his waist-band. He was trying to recollect a sentence that would apply to the circumstance, but as he could not find one, he simply said:

"Ah, well, but he must be restored to his father."

Louveau started.

"That is exactly my trouble, your Reverence. For the six months that I have known all this, I have never had the courage to tell any one, not even my wife. We have denied ourselves so much to bring up that child, we have endured so much poverty together, that now I do not know how I can bring myself to part from him."

All this was true, and if Maugendre seemed to deserve compassion, some pity should also be felt for poor Francis. Possessed by these contradictory sentiments, the vicar was perspiring visibly, while mentally he was requesting light from on high. And forgetting that Louveau had come to ask for his advice, he murmured in a subdued voice:

"Come, now, Francis, if you were in my place, what would you advise?"

The bargeman looked down.

"I quite understand, your Reverence, that

Victor must be given up. I felt that the other day, when Maugendre came upon us unexpectedly. It cut me to the heart to see him so old, so sad, and so broken down. I was as ashamed as if I had his money, stolen money, in my pocket. I could no longer keep this secret to myself, and I have come to tell it you."

"And you have done right, Louveau," said the vicar, delighted at seeing the bargeman find him a solution of the question. "It is never too late to repair an error. I am going with you to Maugendre's, and there you will confess all to him."

"To-morrow, your Reverence."

"No, Francis, immediately."

And observing the poor fellow's grief, and the nervous twisting about of his cap, he entreated in a softer voice:

"I beg of you to do it now, Louveau, whilst we are both resolved."

CHAPTER V.

MAUGENDRE'S AMBITIONS.

A son! Maugendre has a son!

He is gazing at him complacently, as he sits on the opposite cushion in the buzz and hum of the railway carriage that is bearing them towards Nevers.

It was really an abduction. The old man had taken his son away, almost without saying thank you, like a rustic who has won the big prize in the lottery, and runs straight off with it.

He did not want to leave his child open to the old attachments. He was now as greedy for affection, as he formerly was for gold. No borrowing, no sharing: but his treasure is to be for himself only, without the peering eyes of others.

There was a buzzing in Maugendre's ears like that of the express. His head was hot

like the locomotive. But his dreams were hastening on faster than any locomotives or express trains, and passing at a dash over days, and months, and years.

His dreams were of a Victor dressed in dark-green faced with silver : a student of the School of Forestry ! One might even say that this student Maugendre had a sword at his side, and the two-cornered hat on his head, like a student of the *École Polytechnique* — for all the schools and all the uniforms were a little mixed in Maugendre's dreams.

No matter ! Embroidery and gold lace are not spared by the wood-merchant. He has the "rhino" to pay for all that . . . and Victor shall be a gentleman covered with gold lace from head to foot.

Men will speak to him with their hats off.

Fine ladies will be madly in love with him.

And, in one corner, there will be an old man with horny hands, who will say, bridling up :

"This is my son."

"Come now, my son."

"My son" also is dreaming, with his little cap over his eyes — until he gets the two-cornered gold-laced hat.

He would not like his father to see him weeping. But it was sudden, that separation.

Clara had given him a kiss that still glowed on his cheek. Old Louveau turned away, and mother Louveau was very pale.

And Mimile brought him his porringer of soup, to console him. All! even to little Mimile. Oh! how will they live without him? And how will he live without them? The future student of the School of Forestry is so troubled by these thoughts, that every time his father speaks to him, he answers:

"Yes, monsieur Maugendre."

And he is not yet at the end of his tribulations, our little bargeman of the *Belle Nivernaise*. For it costs not only money to become a gentleman, but also sacrifices and sorrows.

Some of these Victor is conscious of, as the quick train passes with a whistle over the bridges above the suburbs of Nevers. It seems to him that he has before seen somewhere, in a sad and distant past, these same narrow streets, and those windows small as the air-holes of a prison, with ravelled rags hanging out of them.

Now they have the pavement beneath their feet, and round them there is the station rout, the crowd of lookers-on, the press of people laden with parcels, the roll of cabs and of heavy railway omnibuses, which travellers carrying rugs tied up with straps, noisily take by assault.

Victor and his father go out of the station gates in a carriage. The wood-merchant sticks to his idea. He must have an immediate transformation. So he takes his son straight away to the college tailor's.

The shop is new, the counters lustrous, and well-dressed gentlemen, like those shown in the colored engravings hung on the wall, open the door for the customers with a patronizing smile.

They put before old Maugendre the choicest of the Fashion Plates, where a collegian is smoking in company with a lady in a riding-habit, a gentleman in a complete hunting suit, and a bride dressed in white satin.

The tailor happens just to have in hand a pattern tunic, padded back and front, with square skirts and gilt buttons. He displays it

to the wood-merchant, who beaming with pride, cries :

" In that, you will look like a soldier."

A gentleman in his shirt sleeves, with a tape round his neck, now comes up to the student Maugendre, and takes the measure of his legs, his waist, and his back-bone.

This operation brings to the mind of the little bargeman remembrances that call the tears to his eyes ! The ways of dear old Louveau, the tempers of the wife with the head-piece — all that has he left behind him for ever.

It is all past and gone now. The correct young man in the regulation uniform, that Victor beholds in the big looking-glass, has nothing in common with the ship-lad of the *Belle Nivernaise.*

The tailor with his toe contemptuously pushes the dishonored boat garments under his bench like a bundle of rags.

Victor feels that he has been made to leave there all his past life. How much is there in that word " leave " ! Here now is he forbidden even to retain the memory of it.

" You must detach yourself from all the errors of your early education," said the Principal sternly, without concealing his distrust.

And in order to facilitate this regeneration, it

is decided that the student Maugendre shall go out of the college only on the first Sunday in each month.

Oh! how he weeps the first night, at the end of the cold dreary dormitory, while the other scholars are snoring on their iron bedsteads, and the assistant-master is devouring a romance on the sly, by the glimmer of a night-light.

How he suffers during the hated hour of recreation, whilst his comrades hustle and mob him!

How weary he is in the study, with his head bent over his desk, trembling at the anger of the usher as the latter with all his might hits his table, repeating ever the same phrase:

"Silence there, sirs."

That shrill voice by stirring up in Victor the bitter dregs of sad memories, blights his whole life.

It reminds him of the dark days of his early childhood, of the crannies in the Temple suburb; of the blows, of the quarrels, — of all that he had forgotten.

He clung desperately to the images of Clara and the *Belle Nivernaise*, as to the one ray of sunshine amid the gloom of his life.

This no doubt was the reason for the drawings of boats that the usher was so astonished

at finding on every page of the student Maugendre's books.

Always the same barge, reproduced on every leaf with the persistence of one possessed.

Sometimes she was slowly ascending the narrow path of the margins, shut in as if on a canal.

Sometimes she was wrecked in the midst of a theorem, splashing over the inserted diagrams and the corollaries in the small print.

Sometimes she was under full sail on the oceans of the maps, and on them she rode at ease, spread all her canvas, and flew her flag.

The Principal, tired of the circumstantial reports made to him on this subject, at length spoke of it to M. Maugendre the father.

The wood-merchant could not get over it:

"A lad so manageable!"

"He is as obstinate as a donkey."

"So intelligent!"

"He cannot be taught anything."

And nobody would understand that the student Maugendre had learnt to read amidst woods looking over Clara's shoulder, and that studying geometry under the ferule of a bearded usher is a very different kind of thing.

This is the reason why the student Maugendre goes down from the "middle school" to the "lower": — it is because there is a singular difference between the lessons of the *magister* at Corbigny, and those of MM. the Professors of the College of Nevers. A distance as great as between teaching in a rabbit-skin cap and teaching in an ermine hat.

Maugendre the elder was in despair. It seemed to him that the Forester in the two-cornered hat was taking great strides far into the distance.

The father chides, he entreats, he promises.

"Do you want lessons? Would you like to have tutors? You shall have the best, the most expensive."

In the meantime, the student Maugendre is becoming a vexation and the "Quarterly Reports" mercilessly exhibit his faultiness. For his own part, he is conscious of his stupidity, and every day he withdraws more and more into obscurity and sadness.

If Clara and the rest could but see what has

been done with their Victor! How they would come and throw wide open the doors of his prison! How cordially they would offer him a share of their last crust of bread, of their last bit of bedding!

But they also are unhappy, poor people. Things are going from bad to worse. The boat is getting older and older.

That Victor knows by Clara's letters, which from time to time come to him with a great, savage "seen," scrawled in red pencil by the Principal, who hates these interfering correspondences.

"Ah! when you used to be here," say these letters of Clara's, always tender, but becoming more and more distressful. . . "Ah! if you were but with us now!"

Was not this as much as to say that all used to go on well in those days, and that all would yet be saved if Victor came back?

Well then, Victor will save all. He will buy a new boat. He will console Clara. He will bring back the trade. He will show them that they have not loved one who is without gratitude, and have not succored one incapable of helping them.

But to do this, he must become a man. Money must be earned, and for that, he must acquire knowledge.

So Victor re-opens his books, and turns over a new leaf.

Now arrows may fly, the usher may strike on his desk with all his might, and emit his parrot phrase :

" Silence there, sirs."

Victor does not lift his eyes from his books. He draws no more boats. He despises the paper missiles, that strike his face. He works . . . he works. . .

" A letter for the student Maugendre."

This reminder of Clara, redolent of liberty and of affection, was like a blessing unexpectedly coming to encourage him in the midst of his studies.

Victor hid his head in his desk to kiss the zigzag, painfully written address, shaky as if a constant heaving of the boat rocked the table Clara was writing on.

Alas ! it was not the heaving of the boat, but the agitation of feeling that had made Clara's hand tremble.

" It is all over, my dear Victor ; the *Belle Nivernaise* will never sail more. She has perished, and her destruction is our ruin. There is this ugly notice on her stern :

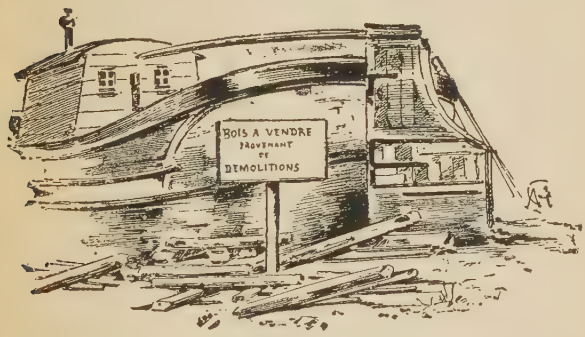
WOOD TO SELL

FROM THE BREAKING UP.

"People came and calculated the value of everything, from the Crew's boat-hook to the cradle in which my little sister was sleeping. It seems they are going to sell everything, and we have nothing left.

"What will become of us? Mamma is nearly dying of grief, and papa is so changed. . . . ."

Victor did not finish the letter. The words



were dancing before his eyes; his face was flushed, and there was a humming in his ears.

Ah! study was now out of the question. Exhausted by work, grief, and fever, he was becoming delirious.

He thought he was drifting on the open Seine, on the beautiful cool river. He wanted to bathe his brow in the stream.

Then he heard vaguely the sound of a bell.

No doubt, some tug that was passing in the fog. Presently it was like the noise of many waters, and he cried :

"The flood ! the flood !"

He began to shiver at the thought of the deep shadow under the arch of the bridge ; and amid all these visions he was conscious of the usher's scared, hirsute countenance under the lamp-shade.

"Are you ill, Maugendre ?"

The student Maugendre was indeed ill. It is no use the doctor shaking his head, when the poor father, who follows him to the college door, asks him in a voice choked with anxiety :

"He is not going to die, is he ?"

For it is plain that the doctor is not confident, at least his gray hairs are not, for they say "no" faintly, as if they were afraid of committing themselves.

No mention now of green coats or of two-cornered hats. It is solely a matter of saving the student Maugendre's life.

The doctor told them frankly that if he should recover, they would do well to restore him to his country freedom.

If he should recover !

The idea of losing the child just restored to him annihilated all the ambitious desires of the

rich father. It is all over with his dream, he renounces it for ever. He is quite ready to bury the student of the School of Forestry with his own hands. He will nail up the coffin, if desired. He will wear no mourning for him. Only but let the other one consent to live! Let him but speak to him, get up, throw his arms round his neck, and say:

"Be comforted, father. I am getting well now."

And the wood-merchant leant over Victor's bed.

It is done. The old tree is cleft to the core. Maugendre's heart has been softened.

"I will let you leave here, my lad. You shall return to them, you shall sail again. And it will be good enough for me to see you sometimes in passing."

At this time, the bell no longer rings the hours for recreation, for study, and for meals. It is the vacation, and the great college is deserted. Not a sound is heard save that of the fountain in the courtyard, and the sparrows chirping on the grassplots. The rattle of an occasional carriage sounds dull and distant, for they have laid down straw in the street.

It is in the midst of this silence and this solitude, that the student Maugendre comes to himself again.

He is surprised to find himself in a very white bed, surrounded by large muslin curtains that spread about him the seclusion of subdued light and quietude.

He would much like to raise himself up on the pillow, and draw them apart a little, to see where he is ; but his strength is unequal to the effort, although he feels himself most delightfully refreshed. So he waits.

But there are voices whispering near him. One would fancy there were feet walking on tiptoe over the floor, and even a well-known stumping, something like the promenade of a broom-handle over the boards. Victor had heard that before. Where ? Surely on the deck of the *Belle Nivernaise*. That's it !

And the patient, collecting all his strength, cries out with a feeble voice, which he however means for a loud one :

" Yeho ! Crew ! yeho ! "

The curtains are withdrawn, and in the dazzling burst of light, he sees all the dear ones he has so often called on in his delirium.

All ? Yes, all ! They are all there. Clara, Maugendre, Louveau, mother Louveau, Mimile, the little sister ; and the scalded old heron, as thin as his own boat-hook, was smiling immensely his silent smile.

And every arm is stretched towards him, every head is bent, there are kisses from everybody, smiles, shakes of the hand, questions.

"Where am I? Why are you here?"

But the doctor's orders are precise, and the gray hairs were in downright earnest when thus prescribing:

"He must keep his arms under the bedclothes, be quiet, and not get excited."

And in order to prevent his child from talking, Maugendre goes on speaking all the time.

"Would you believe that it is ten days ago — the day you fell ill — that I had just seen the Principal to speak to him about you? He told me you were making progress, and that you were working like a machine. . . You may imagine how pleased I was! I asked to see you, and you were sent for, when at that moment your master rushed into the Principal's study quite frightened. You had just had an attack of high fever. I ran to the infirmary; you did not recognize me, your eyes were like tapers, you were in delirium! Ah! my dear lad, how ill you were! I did not leave you for a moment. You kept raving on. You were talking about the *Belle Nivernaise*, about Clara, about the new boat, and I know not

what else. Then I recollected the letter — Clara's letter ; it had been found in your hands, and they had given it to me, and, for the time, I had forgotten all about it, you know ! I drew it from my pocket, I read it, I shook my head, and I said to myself : 'Maugendre, your disappointment must not make you forget your friends' trouble.' Then I wrote to all these good people to come and see us. No answer. I took advantage of a day on which you were rather better, to go and find them, and I brought them to my house, where they are now living and where they will live, until some means of settling their affairs has been found. Is it not so, friend Louveau ? "

Every one has a tear in his eye, and, on my word ! — so much the worse for the doctor's gray hairs, — the two arms come out of the bed-clothes, and Maugendre is embraced as he has never been before, — the real kiss of an affectionate child.

Then, as it is impossible to take Victor home, they arrange their future life — Clara will remain with the patient in order to sweeten his draughts and chat with him ; mother Louveau will go to keep house ; Francis shall go and superintend a building that the timber-merchant has contracted for in the *Grande Rue*.

As for Maugendre, he is going to Clamecy. He is going to see some acquaintances who have a large contract for wood. These people will be delighted to engage so clever a bargeman as Louveau.

No! no! No objections, no opposition. It is an understood thing, quite a simple matter.

Certainly it is not for Victor to object.

He is now lifted up and rolled in his big arm-chair to the window.

He is alone with Clara, in the silent infirmary.

And Victor is delighted. He blesses his illness. He blesses the sale of the *Belle Nivernaise*. He blesses all the sales and all the illnesses in the world.

"Do you remember, Clara, when I used to hold the tiller, and you would come and sit beside me, with your knitting?"

Clara remembered so well that she cast

down her eyes, and blushed, and both of them were rather embarrassed.

For now, he is no longer the little lad in a red cap, whose feet could not reach to the deck when he climbed up on the tiller, and sat astride it.

And she, when she comes in the morning and takes off her little shawl, and throws it on the bed, appears quite a handsome young woman; her arms are so round, and her waist is so slender.

"Come early, Clara, and stop as long as you can."

It is so nice to have breakfast and dinner, the two together, near the window in the shade of the white curtains.

They are reminded of their early childhood, of the pap eaten at the edge of the bed with the same spoon. Ah! those memories of childhood!

They flit about the college infirmary like birds in an aviary. No doubt they make their nest in every corner of the curtains, for each morning there are fresh ones newly opened for their flight.

And truly, if you heard their conversations about the past, you would say that they were a couple of octogenarians looking back only on the distance behind them.

Now, is there not a future, which also may have some interest for them?

Yes, there is such a future: and it is often thought of, if it is never mentioned.

Besides it is not absolutely necessary to use phrases in conversing. There is a certain way of taking hold of a hand, and of blushing at every turn, which says a great deal more than words. Victor and Clara talk in that language all day long.

That is probably the reason why they are so often silent. And that, too, is why the days pass so quickly that the month glides by noiselessly and imperceptibly.

That is the reason why the doctor is obliged to make his gray hairs bristle up, and to turn his patient out of the infirmary.

Just at this time, Maugendre the elder returns from his journey. He finds them all assembled in his house. And he cannot help smiling, when poor Louveau very anxiously asks him:

"Well, will they have anything to do with me down there?"

"Will they not, old man? . . . They wanted a master for a new boat, and they thanked me for the gift I was giving them."

Who can these people be? Old Louveau

was so delighted he did not inquire further. And everybody set off for Clamecy without knowing anything more about it.

What a pleasure, when they get to the banks of the canal!

There, on the quay, a magnificent boat,

adorned with flags from top to bottom, and brand new, raises her polished mast amid the green fields.

They are giving her the last touch of varnish, and the stern on which the name of the craft is painted, remains covered with gray canvas.

A cry breaks from every mouth :

"What a fine boat!"

Louveau does not believe his eyes. He has a deuced queer feeling of smarting in the eyelids, of a splitting open of his mouth about a foot wide, and of a shaking of his ear-rings like a couple of salad paniers.

"That is too grand! I would not dare undertake to steer a boat like that. She was never made to sail. She should be put under a glass case."

Maugendre had to push him by force on the foot-bridge, where the Crew was making signals to them.

How is this! Has the Crew himself been repaired? Yes, repaired, refitted, caulked afresh. He has a boat-hook, and a wooden leg, both quite new.

These are the gifts of the contractor, a man of intelligence, who has done the thing well. As, for example; the deck is of waxed wood, and is surrounded by a handrail. There is a seat for resting yourself, and an awning to afford shade from the sun.

The hold is big enough to carry a double cargo. And the cabin! — oh, the cabin!

"Three apartments!"

"A kitchen!"

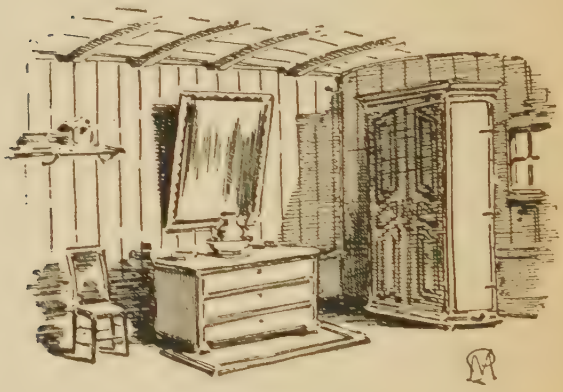
"Mirrors!"

Louveau drew Maugendre aside on the deck. He was touched, shaken by his feelings — as were his ear-rings. He stammered out:

"Dear old Maugendre . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"You have forgotten one thing."



"Yes?"

"You have not told me the name of the firm on account of whom I am to sail."

"You want to know?"

"Certainly!"

"Well then, on your own account!"

"How? . . . but then . . . the boat . . ."

"Is yours!"

What an event, my friends! What close pressings of breast to breast!

It is fortunate that the contractor — who is a man of intelligence — had bethought himself of putting a seat upon the deck.

Louveau drops upon it like a man felled by a blow.

"It is impossible. . . we cannot accept."

Maugendre has an answer ready for everything:

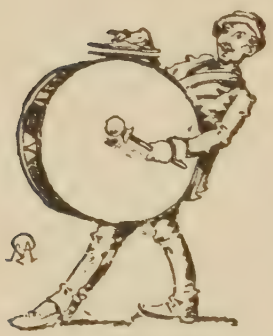
"Come, now, you are forgetting our old debt, the money you have laid out for Victor. Keep your mind easy, Francis; it is I who owe you the most."

And the two companions kissed each other like brothers. No mistake this time; they wept.

Assuredly Maugendre has arranged everything to make the surprise complete, for whilst they are embracing each other on the deck, behold his Reverence, the Vicar, issuing from the wood, with a band behind him and a banner floating on the wind.

What can this be for? It is for the benediction of the boat, most certainly. All Clamecy has come in procession to be present at the celebration.

The banner is floating out in the breeze.
And the band is playing —
"Rum, — dum — dum."
Every face looks happy, and over all there is a bright sun that makes the silver of the cross and the brass of the musicians' instruments flash again.



What a celebration! They have just taken away the canvas that covered the stern; and the name of the boat shows up in gold letters on an azure ground:

"La Nouvelle Nivernaise."

Hurrah for the *Nouvelle Nivernaise!*

May she have as long a life as the old one, and a happier old age!

The Vicar steps up to the boat. Behind him, the singers and the musicians are drawn up in a row, while the banner forms a background.

"*Benedicat Deus. . .*"

Victor is the godfather, Clara the godmother. The Vicar asks them to come forward to the edge of the quay close to himself.

They hold each other's hand, and are bashful, trembling. They confusedly stammer out the words that the choir-boy whispers to them, whilst the Vicar is shaking the holy-water sprinkler over them:

"*Benedicat Deus. . .*"

Would you not have taken them for a young couple at the altar? That thought occurs to everybody. Perhaps it occurs to themselves also, for they dare not look at each other, and they get more and more confused as the ceremony proceeds.

At length it is finished. The crowd retires. The *Nouvelle Nivernaise* has received her benediction.

But you cannot let the musicians go away like that, without any refreshments.

And, whilst Louveau is pouring out bumpers for the musicians, Maugendre, winking at mother Louveau, takes the godfather and godmother by the hand and turning towards the Vicar, asks:

"Here is the baptism finished, your Reverence; when will the marriage come off?"

Victor and Clara become as red as poppies. Mimile and his little sister clap their hands.

And, in the midst of the general enthusiasm, old Louveau, very excited, leans over his

daughter's shoulder, and laughing up to his ears in anticipation of his joke, the honest bargeman says in a bantering tone :

" Well now, Clara, now's the time, . . shall we take Victor back to the magistrate's ? "

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